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The Beautiful *Shōnen* of the Deep and Moonless Night: The Boyish Aesthetic in Modern Japan

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Summary

Men increasingly define themselves through the management of their bodies in today's media-driven society, and bodily ideals operate as a major point of cultural reference — influencing men's perceptions of their own bodies, and indeed their self-identities. One of the dominant modes of ideal male beauty in contemporary Japan, as embodied by many of the country's male actors, models, and celebrities, differs from the generalized Western ideal of muscularity; being slender, *shōnen*-like (boyish), and predominantly *kawaii* (cute) are in vogue. These clean-cut, boyish demeanors, I argue, visually allude to a type of male identity that is situated in a liminal realm between boyhood and manhood, embodied not only by adolescent boys but also by young men in that timescape between “adolescence” and what some societies see as manhood. The primary aim of this article is to examine a particular sector of the significance of this male beauty in contemporary Japanese popular culture — namely the *bishōnen*, the beautiful boy positioned between child and adult. While the term *bishōnen* has been used extensively in its literal sense — any beautiful young man, in studies of the aesthetic imagination of Japanese boyhood — it is much more than just a genre label; it denotes a critical concept and an imagined figure of the boy. This article examines *bishōnen* as a cultural imagination, a complex ideal of boyish identity in Japanese popular culture, and argues that the way *bishōnen* is perceived and conceptualized calls into question the widely assumed equation of human beauty with sexual desire — pointing to the potential of *bishōnen* beauty to be appreciated purely on an aesthetic level.

Keywords: Japanese popular culture, *bishōnen*, boys, bodily aesthetics, prolonged youth, gender

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